

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN
CHAIRMAN, SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
SURFACE TRANSPORTATION AND MERCHANT MARINE
HIGHWAY/RAIL GRADE CROSSING SAFETY
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- Thank you Chairman Hutchison for convening this hearing. You have long been a leader of grade crossing safety and I commend you for the commitment you have made to this critical issue.
- Last week's accident involving an Amtrak train and a truck resulted in 11 fatalities and more than 100 injuries. The accident was tragic, but it serves as a very grim reminder that accidents can still occur even when safety initiatives have been put in place to protect against their occurrence.
- The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is investigating the accident, and although press reports would lead some to make quick conclusions, I caution against such hasty action. In the meantime, however, I share Senator Hutchison's interest in reviewing existing Federal and State policies to determine what can be done to improve grade crossing safety.
- Speaking of safety, I also want to take a moment to express my disappointment over the President's recent budget submission for the Department of Transportation for the year 2000, the new millennium.
- Secretary Slater has been very forceful in his remarks that "safety" is DOT's top priority -- routinely referring to safety as its "north star". Yet I find it ironic that DOT's fiscal year 2000 budget proposes to allocate more money to environmental protection programs at DOT than to departmental safety programs. How long will Administrative officials continue their safety banter when their own budget doesn't even back them up?
- Of the \$50.5 billion proposed for transportation, a whopping \$3.4 billion is dedicated for safety across all modes, as opposed to \$3.9 billion for DOT's environmental programs. Moreover, the money for the environment is "all accounted for" in budget jargon, versus the questionable user fee schemes the Administration has proposed to pay for many safety activities, including NTSB accident investigations and FRA safety inspections. I find this outrageous.
- In the case of grade crossing safety, of the \$22.4 million requested for fiscal year 2000, 85 percent is dedicated to high-speed rail corridors. Yet, today, there are NO high speed rail trains even in operation. We are told Amtrak's highspeed

trains will be operating later this year, and a few states are working on developing high speed ground transportation, but how does one justify spending 85 percent of the very limited grade crossing safety budget in this manner?

- A miserly \$37,000 is proposed for public awareness and outreach, and \$50,000 for outreach to judges, law enforcement and the public. These are two of the very promising safety areas where FRA, the NTSB, and FHWA say we should focus our attention. Yet, DOT doesn't even plan to dedicate one percent of its grade crossing safety budget to these efforts. I just don't get it.
- With no high-speed trains operating today and most crossings have been addressed already on the Northeast, I will be very interested to find out why the Administration is devoting the lion's share of its own grade crossing safety resources on high-speed rail rather than at city and rural crossings where so many people lose their lives each year.
- I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses and hope they will share with us some of their suggestions on where we should focus our limited grade crossing safety dollars.